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13 gypsy moths caught in Washington in summer trapping

OLYMPIA – The gypsy moth—a destructive forest pest that causes millions of dollars of damage each year in the eastern and midwestern U.S.—showed up again in Washington this past summer. But the 13 moths caught at five different sites this year by the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) was the lowest number caught since 1980. The previous low since 1980 was 17 catches in 2002.

Seven of the 13 moths were caught in Puyallup near the South Hill Mall; two in Marysville in Snohomish County and two near Sunset Beach in Mason County. Single moths were caught in Renton and Fife.

The low number of moths detected, however, does not preclude an eradication project in 2011. Agriculture officials are inspecting multiple catch sites for other evidence of gypsy moth activity before deciding whether to propose an eradication treatment for next spring. WSDA's last treatment for gypsy moth took place in Kent in 2007.

State agriculture officials don't know for sure why so few moths were caught in 2010. At least three factors probably contributed, according to Dr. Jim Marra, WSDA managing entomologist: the cold weather experienced in the state last spring, the economic slowdown in the U.S. that resulted in fewer people visiting or moving to Washington from infested states, and WSDA's successful eradication treatments of the past that didn't allow introductions to become infestations.

The gypsy moth is one of America's worst forest pests. It attacks more than 500 species of deciduous and evergreen trees, has defoliated millions of U.S. trees and spreads quickly once established. Gypsy moths normally arrive in Washington in the form of egg masses attached to outdoor articles, such as picnic tables, birdhouses, and children's toys brought here from 19 permanently infested states on the East Coast and in the upper Midwest. Some moths have arrived on foreign ships docked at Washington ports.

The number of moths caught in Washington since 1980 varies widely—peaking at 1,315 in 1983. Eighteen moths were caught in 2009, 21 in 2008, and 24 in 2007.

Permanent populations of the gypsy moth have never been detected in Washington.

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